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#### MAN BETWEEN BIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL THINKING<sup>1</sup>

Despite triviality of the statement that both the biologist and the theologian may talk about man, it is less trivial and less obvious to remark that they will never tell the same. If this divergence of the opinions were obvious, no conflict would appear between biological and theological views concerning human being. The conflict is, however, an indubitable historical fact and it is just its obviousness, which bears a question for the difference between the biological and theological views upon man.

A biologist describes man in the context of the biodiversity of living organisms and establishes man's evolutionary position among them. In all his statements, the biologist is extremely particular about the taxonomic precision – e.g. about carefully differentiating between declarations on the genus *Homo* and on the species *Homo sapiens*. Such differentiation is never considered by a theologian, who, when talking about man, talks always about human beings he knows due to his personal and historical experience. These human beings are, therefore, identical to contemporary man. If a theologian intends to make more precise his statement about man, he makes it clear that *verus homo*, the „right man“ is in question – as did Pius XII in his encyclical *Humani generis* of 1950 (p.576). The term, „right man“ is, however, useless for a biologist.

The distinction between the physical and theological anthropologies is usually drawn by claiming that only the physical anthropology is an empirical science. While being generally accepted by theologians, this view has been questioned by a physicist. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker (1971: 36) grants a status of an empirical science to theology by saying that „similarly as empirical sciences, religion is based on commonly accessible experience“. Alfred Gierer, the director of the Max-Planck-Institut in Tübingen, (1995: 221) seems to share this view by claiming that „definitely more knowledge about man follows from self-experience and verbal communication with other people than from the top results of neurological investigations“.

It seems, however, that the discussed empirical difference between biology and theology cannot explain the basic differences between the

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biological and theological statements concerning man. These differences are clearly revealed by the following examples comparing two pairs of theological and biological opinions on man:

First example: After the Catholic Church Catechism (1992: 355) man is a being created for God's likeness, which integrates in his nature the realities of spirit and matter. On the other hand, Jared Diamond (1992/1998) claims that *Homo sapiens* is only a species besides *Pan paniscus* and *Pan troglodytes*, because 98.4% of his DNA is identical to the DNA of those two species of chimpanzee.

Second example: The theologian Helmut Thielecke (1973: 109/114) characterises man as a being, which realises himself by formulating his own aims and which, therefore, is never an object, but a subject of his destiny. In contrary, the biologists Bernard Wood and Mark Collard (1999: 71/71) assigned to mankind all beings related more closely to *Homo sapiens* than to the australopithecines in body size, body proportions, postcranial skeleton, relative size of teeth and jaws, extended period of growth and development.

The above dissimilarity of terms in which a theologian and a biologist describe man indicates that although for both of them man is an object of considerations, each of them poses absolutely different questions. In the past it was claimed that while a biologist was interested only in „how” – i.e. in a phenomenon of man, a theologian always looked for „what” and „why” – i.e. for a profound causality of the human being. This differentiation promoted mainly by „philosophising” theologians appeared, however, too much simplified. Also a biologist poses reasonable questions for „what” and „why”; as recently discussed by Ernst Mayr in his book *This is biology* (1997/1998). It is clear nowadays that both a theologian and a biologist ask questions for „how”, „what” and „why”. Their questions, however, are addressed to substantially different aspects of humanity: while a biologist asks for man's appointments, a theologian asks for his existence. This is the reason for different departures from theological and biological explanations: while a biologist explains man in the context of his past, a theologian does the same in the perspective of future. Consequently, for a theologian time is never a simple sequence of consecutive time-intervals, but an expected or realised fullfulness, an opportunity either put to good account, or lost (Hübner 1966: 233).

Such understanding of time makes it that theological reasoning principally concerns life and destiny of an individual person; only a secon-

dary reference is made to the history of human species or genus. Thus, although both a theologian and a biologist talk about the development of man, each of them means a different sort of development. While a biologist talks about particular stages of the development of human species, a theologian considers personal development of an individual.

The methodology of science instructs that the particularity of questions stands for the autonomy of different disciplines of research. Each of them enriches the knowledge about the reality just by their unique questions and answers. In this way e.g. chemistry inspires physics and geology gives inspiration to geography. Therefore, a methodologist being unaware of history would never understand why biology and theology equipped with their own systems of questions, notions and methodologies would be unable to yield complementary interpretations of man. Such a methodologist would probably reprimand and even make fun of anybody, who would suggest any collision between theological and biological views concerning man.

It is well known that it was the evolutionary interpretation of man's past, which gave rise to the argument between theologians and biologists. Contrary to the common opinion, the argument didn't concern the human position in nature. The common thesis of man's humiliation and his degradation to the world of animals appeared only in later philosophical reflections on evolution. In the beginning it has not been the crucial point of the controversy, because the question for an exceptional position of man (*Sonderstellung des Menschen*) is an internal question of biology. This question is not asked in theology: man's exceptional position is here an axiom.

After all, the first evolutionists were actually in favour of the concept of the special position of man. It was defended not only by Thomas Huxley (Hofer, Altner 1972: 5, 150), but also by Ernst Haeckel (1902: 809/10), who wrote in 1868: „His (man's) gradual development starting from the lower vertebrates means indeed a triumph of humanity over the whole nature”. This declaration brings Haeckel's magnificent work to an end, whose keynote follows at once from the title: *Natürliche Schöpfungs-Geschichte* – i.e. *Natural History of Creation*; the term „natural” firmly emphasized. Exactly the same reasoning was recapitulated 100 years later by Ernst Mayr (1997/1998: 295), who wrote: „The theory of evolution ... justified the view, that the origin of man needs no assumptions of supernatural events.”

Haeckel himself was an indefatigable propagator of this view. He profoundly believed in an universal validity of physical determinism,

which enables the explanation of the whole reality. In the quoted work he wrote e.g. „We firmly stress that causal internal relationships between all phenomena known in biology are exclusively mechanical. Similarly, all explanations following from the theory of evolution are mechanical („physical”). This means that only efficient causes (*Causae efficientes*) are meaningful, purposeful causes (*Causae finales*) being excluded. All of this, in turn, yields a firm basis for philosophical monism and definitely overturns the philosophy of dualism and finalism” (Haeckel 1868/1902: 794).

Haeckel was probably the first and the last biologist, who so openly and positively linked philosophy with evolutionary interpretation of man and who so keenly oppugned all teleological and theological interpretations. The remark of Ernst Mach (1906: 4) may suggest to what extent Haeckel was just a child of his times: „Nowadays, most of naturalists are fond of materialistic philosophy without seeing its evident drawbacks”. Maybe, the philosophy of French existentialism in the mid XXth. century affected in a similar way the biological views of Jacques Monod. Without this influence Monod would never conclude his reasoning on human evolution by the statement sounding like an excerpt from Sartre or Camus: „Man knows at last that, as a product of hazard, he may rely only on himself in a neutral infinity of Universe. He also knows that neither his destiny, nor obligations have anywhere been listed. Darkness or Kingdom are up to his choice” (Monod 1970: 195). Maybe Edward Wilson is also a specific representative of the pluralism of contemporary postmodern philosophy. Similarly, as Haeckel and Monod, Wilson believes in full explicability of man within biological evolution. But, he remarks that it is not faith, which decides whether anyone is for or against the evolutionary interpretation of man (Wilson 1998: 317).

Specific philosophy not only formed evolutionary views of a number of biologists. Nowadays, it is clear that anti-evolutional views of many theologians originated from similar specific philosophy. Although those theologians always referred to biblical description of man's creation, the Bible has never been the only reason and often not the principal reason for their criticism towards the theory of evolution. After all, since St. Augustine it has been clear that non-literal, allegoric interpretation of the Holy Bible may be acceptable. The theologians also knew the directive originating from the old argument on heliocentrism and readily used by Galileo: „Bible does not tell how heaven goes, it tells how to go to heaven”. In view of this idea it became easy to comment on the argument on evo-

lution by saying: „Bible does not tell what is man’s origin, it tells, however, what is his destination”. It was not so much Bible, but rather aristotelian–scholastic philosophy, which motivated the anti–evolutional theologians. The specific understanding of causality typical for this kind of philosophy excluded *a priori* the possibility for including man into the evolutionary sequence of living creatures.

The scholastic principle of causality (*Nihil reducitur de potentia ad actum nisi per ens actu*) assumed substantial dependence of an effect on its cause and, therefore, excluded the possibility of something major may develop from something minor. Causality interpreted in such a way implied that a sentence „X developed from Y and Z” was to be understood exclusively as „X is exclusively Y or/and Z”. In view of the above understanding of causal relationships an acceptance of the evolutionary development of man meant the acceptance of the conclusion: “Man is only an animal”. One can hardly be surprised that theologians could not accept the latter conclusion. It is, however, surprising that biologists drew this sort of conclusions from the theory of evolution. By doing so, they just proved that also their own way of thinking (not only that of theologians) was still seriously affected by the ancient interpretation of the principle of causality.

Many years of methodological reflection were necessary for finally conquering this way of thinking by biologists and theologians. After a new paradigm, which has become universal since the 30’, a continuity of development no longer excludes an appearance of a new creature substantially different from its progenitors. These were the concepts of Teilhard de Chardin (1955: 187–203), which played a particular role in the promotion of the evolutionary paradox of a harmonious link between continuity and discontinuity. According to his concept, man is both reducible and irreducible to the world of animals and although the first man’s birth was an event prepared for a long time, it was absolutely exceptional in its newness.

The substance of the theological–biological argument was also affected by the philosophy of René Descartes and his postulate of World’s division into the objective–material (*res extensa*) and subjective–spiritual (*res cogitans*) ones. Wolfgang Pannenberg and Christian Link (1991: 336 nn) consider this vision of World as the main reason for the definite separation of biology and theology. While biology concentrated on the objective world of nature and forgot about the specificity of human reality, theology focused attention on human subjectivity – i.e. human life history, loosing the context of nature and its relationship to man.

The above remarks of two renowned theologians yield an explanation not only to the specificity of biological and theological concepts of World, but also to the origin of their mutual conflict. An important complement is, however, necessary: The reason for the importance of the Descartes' dualism lay in positivistic and scientific philosophy, where „objective” meant „scientific” („rational”) and „subjective” was identified with „non-scientific”. This scheme of thinking has finally been overcome, notably due to contemporary physics. Its decay, in turn, brought to an end the biological–theological debate on human evolution.

From the point of view of theology, the controversy was definitely closed by the message of John Paul II (1996: 951–953) to the Pontifical Academy of Science on 28 October 1996. The Pope admitted that „the theory of evolution contributes to the knowledge of man” and „the present state of knowledge enables to recognise the theory of evolution more than a hypothesis”. Two years after this message he dedicates a separate encyclical letter to the relation of faith and knowledge (*Fides et ratio*, 1998). It refers to the old Christian tradition where faith and knowledge enrich each other and the Creator can be recognised even in a rational way. According to the actual standpoint of the catholic theology there is no more antagonism between creation and evolution. She visualises God as the one who creates and acts through evolution. The theologians have therefore given up the initial mistrust against the evolutionary biology.

It would be difficult to expect that biologists might do the same in respect to the theology. However, the fact that, in parallel with consequently evolutionary explanation of man, the biologists search for man's uniqueness indicates their amicable intentions. For example, Ernst Mayr (1997/1998: 338) and Edward Wilson (1998: 372) point at the open character of the behaviour program, and at the infinite intellectual potential as features distinguishing man from animals. Jared Diamond (1992/1998: 23) known from calling man „a third chimpanzee” claims, in turn: „Apparently, a slight modification of genetic equipment of a chimpanzee caused an enormous change leading to human behaviour”. Regardless the particular view on the relationship between man and the world of animals, no serious biologist will claim that he searches for an answer to a question “what is the goal of human life?”. This is a theologian, who asks this sort of questions.

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